

MEDIA ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL STEPHEN L. HOOG, USA,  
DIRECTOR OF THE AIR COMPONENT COORDINATION ELEMENT,  
MULTINATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ

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GEN. HOOG: I'd be more than happy to take detailed questions later.

As you know, most of the folks who live in the -- (inaudible) -- world -- we're just  
sort of relying on (charts ?). I'll try to do my best to get through this -- (inaudible).

Probably the biggest things to start with is what the commanders -- (inaudible) --  
organization. And I'll just kind of give it to you verbatim. You know, our mission here is  
to build an Iraqi air force capable of conducting air operations across the entire spectrum  
of the counterinsurgency fight that's sustainable and with a force structure that they can  
maintain while laying a foundation for future growth for the Iraqi air force.

The common -- (inaudible) -- here is that everybody knows -- a statement of the obvious, but sometimes it's forgotten -- that the Iraqi air force had 900 modern airplanes, you know, 17, 18 years ago. So, it's not that they don't know how to run an air force. It's that they don't know how to do an air force in this environment. And we're -- (inaudible).

One of the questions that frequently is asked is, where is the air force (in their final line ?) development? How big is it? Well, the air force is just under 1,000 people -- about 950 people -- (inaudible) -- in the Iraqi air force. They've got about 83 to 86 cadets at any given time in its dedicated English training. And they're authorized, as of about two months ago, for 2,900. And our goal this year is to expand their air force from that 950 up to around 19(00) to 2,000 in a controlled fashion.

And the way to do that -- the first thing is we have to rehire some of the old Iraqi air force folks they had from the past that have the technical skills we need -- air traffic controllers, maintenance, warrant officers, aviation pilots, whether it be helicopter or fixed-wing. And the Iraqi air force has actually got a significant rehire program ongoing as we speak led by Major General Kamal, the chief of their air force.

The other piece is as we stand up some training pipelines this year, everything we're doing in the Air Force is tailored to dovetail right behind what -- (inaudible) -- folks have done in training the Iraqi army. For example, we're not going to recruit a young Iraqi right off the street to become an Iraqi airman. Everybody's going to come in to be a jundi -- soldier. And then at some point, we'll -- (inaudible) -- one of the air bases. So, it's not a separate pipeline. It's all dovetailed together.

(Inaudible) -- the officer training -- (inaudible) -- current one-year program -- (inaudible). The first eight months are all together joined, and it's not until the nine-month point where the normal Iraqi ground force lieutenant -- (inaudible) -- (split ?) off into small units that we take off the young Iraqis -- (inaudible) -- the air force and bring them into an air force-specific -- (inaudible).

As far as that pipeline goes, the things we've got going right now, as I mentioned, English language training. As you might expect, aviation training and any type of -- (inaudible) -- English around the world -- (inaudible) -- more, especially these young Iraqi -- (inaudible) -- English to them so they can -- (inaudible).

Along that line, of our goals is to set up an initial flight training program in northern Iraq. Mostly right now, it's at the air base, and we'll see how it all tracks out. Sometime late this fall -- October, November -- we actually start -- (inaudible) -- training their rotary-wing and fixed-wing aviators. But to date, the Iraqis have -- (inaudible) -- to offer training in the U.S., U.K., the UAE and Jordan. This will represent the first effort to actually train folks -- (inaudible). As you might expect, the Iraqi air force, the average age of the -- (inaudible) -- is really old, about 45 to 47-years-old. This would actually represent -- (inaudible) -- next generation of the new Iraqi -- (inaudible).

In terms of equipment, we basically operate a fleet of three different helicopters and a couple of fixed-wing. I'll walk you through the helicopters. First and foremost is the Bell Jet Ranger 206 BIII. They were gifted earlier on from the United Arab Emirates. They're very simple, reliable. Anybody who's been around helicopters would know them. We use it primarily as an initial trainer type asset as well (a currency ?) training for those pilots that have been with the Iraqi air force for a while but didn't have any other helicopters to fly. Part of that is because the second airplane they have is the old UH-1 Huey that's been upgraded to what they call the Huey II modification. They've got 16 of those total -- five of them are here, 11 of them are still back at the U.S. getting refurbished as we speak. And they take the Huey and they put a brand new engine, brand new transmission and redo basically everything -- (if you will ?), make it a zero-time airframe. And as one of the Army warrants who's flying it now who has lots of time in the Huey said, this is what the Huey should have been like in the first place -- lots of power and very maneuverable. And then the third helicopter they fly is the MI-17. People ask why the MI-17. The simple answer that a lot of folks have flew it before. And if you've been around this part of the world, it's reliable, and it's fairly inexpensive. It was tied up in a lot of current controversy with the initial procurement back in '04, '05. And as a result, it's got a lot of delays until about four months ago when the Iraqi air force and the Iraqi MOB were able to renegotiate a contract. And now, they actually have a contract that's got 18 more of these helicopters en route so that by the summer of '08, we should have a fleet of 28 MI-17s. That's the rotary-wing piece.

On the fixed-wing piece, they're flying three aircraft right now, one of which is -- they call it the SAMA CH2000. To you and I, it looks like a Cherokee 140 D. It holds two people side by side. They've got eight of them, and they use it primarily for surveilling the -- (inaudible) -- lines -- power lines out here. It's got a fairly low tech (steer ?) on the front. The type of steer you might have seen on one of the highway patrol helicopters four or five years ago. But it does have day and nighttime capability. And they have radios, of course. They can radio back to the ground. They've got eight of those, and they fly them up north in Kirkuk and down at Basra. They have deployed some of them into Baghdad. As a matter of fact, I flew over Baghdad for an hour in one of these things supporting the Baghdad security operation, looking at checkpoints and (blocking ?) points to make sure that the (blocking ?) were still valid and not pushed out of the way or figured out how to -- (inaudible). They also have a Seeker 2000 which is a (push ?) prop airplane -- tail dragger. It came in early from JAI and Jordan. A good little airplane to fly around and surveil pipeline. It's about 80 knots. (Inaudible) -- front of the blast is almost like a helicopter. (That's at high ?) visibility. But it has some pretty good limitations in terms of (crosswind ?) -- 15 knots crosswind and the wind will blow it over. So, it's really only useful in the winter months and in the summer months early on before the wind picks up. Then the biggest thing they have is a 3 C-130E donated, obviously, from the United States government. This is their most mature program and the one we're most comfortable with, because it's something we obviously fly day in and day out.

We've been able to embed about 75 of our advisers in this unit. We're training not only pilots here -- (inaudible) -- at Little Rock, navigators as well as the maintenance side of the house where we have -- in our Air Force, we've got different skill levels for

mechanics -- (inaudible). And we are actually up to now -- the Iraqis are at the high seven level, and they're training Iraqi five levels. That program's been in existence for about two and a half years as opposed to -- (inaudible). And they're also getting more mature about tasking it. As a joint operation center -- (inaudible) -- the ability to sort through requirements and tasking out the -- (inaudible) -- have gotten better. So far this year, for example, since January, we have already carried 1,950 Iraqi troops in the C-130s bringing a lot of them into the Baghdad area -- (inaudible) -- you know -- (inaudible).

They've got two more fixed-wing airplanes on the horizon. They've got a Cessna Caravan is what it's called -- the 208B. And if you've been over here before, it's kind of like what you might have heard is the air scan. It's a single-engine turbo prop that's very durable, very rugged. It can land anywhere. It doesn't need a prepared surface. And it's got a pretty good infrared sensor and -- (inaudible). And we can fly around much higher than the 3,000 to 5,000 feet the other airplanes have flown. This can get up to about 8,000 to 10,000. And it has their first downlink capability where they can beam a TV image down to the ground, you know, 15, 20 miles away to help do some surveilling. That's due in here in April. It will probably train for a month and a half. The next two airplanes are coming by June, and by the end of June, all three of them should be operating according to the ISR mission.

And they have ordered a more advanced airplane. It's called a King Air 350. For all those with prior military experience, it looks a lot like the Army C-12. It's just a later generation of that -- a twin turbo prop. It has the same MX-15 ISR sensor on it -- (inaudible). It has the basic radar capability with a longer-range downlink so it can really perform some ISR missions and feed back the information over 100 miles away. And that kind of rounds out the air fleet -- (inaudible.)

Currently, there are four bases in Iraq -- north of Kirkuk, south of Basra, center of Baghdad and what they call -- (inaudible) -- or BIAP where they have the C-130s and Taji which is to the northwest of Baghdad where they have the helicopters operating. And that's where my embedded transition teams are embedded with the Iraqis. We currently have about 260 -- (inaudible) -- 240 within the next two months. And when we help set up the flight training school later on this year, it will be -- (inaudible) -- Iraqi -- (inaudible).

So, the summary is we're going to try to double the size of the air force this year in a controlled manner. We're going to do that by getting the pipelines stood up, and we're going to leverage all the good work that the Army has done with their CMET training programs. We just tap into that. We really think we've got this air force tailored for the counterinsurgency fight -- (inaudible) -- mobility and ISR -- (inaudible) -- airlift. And we're looking at sustainable platforms over time. We're trying to get the Iraqi air force members to come back in greater numbers. We think we're going to have some success on that. But as you know, it takes longer to train the people in an aviation unit sometimes than it does to build the hardware. So, we're working that piece. And the final piece, I guess, is that our advisers operate side by side with these guys, whether it's

in the Huey, the CH2000, they operate side by side -- (inaudible) -- basis, and they go out and do the mission.

So with that I'll take your questions.

Q Yes, General, it's Mark Finkelstein from Media Research Center. Thank you very much for speaking with us this morning. It's a pleasure on our part.

In listening to your description of the various rotary and fixed-wing, if I did not misunderstand, you were describing surveillance and (logistical ?) support-type aircraft. Are there any plans for the Iraqi army to acquire and be trained in these combat aircraft? And if so, is there a timetable on that?

GEN. HOOG: There aren't any hard plans right now. I mean, obviously, that's a capability these people are looking at in the future. So, the short answer is that the first capability we'd see would be something, you know, turbo prop-based, as I've mentioned before. But we don't have any hard plans going that way right now. We'll continue to see how it develops, and we'll go from there.

Q And a quick follow-up. You described our people flying side by side with the Iraqis. Are the Iraqis -- do they have command responsibility for any of the flights that are currently going on? And do they ever fly, you know, with a solo Iraqi squad at this point?

GEN. HOOG: Yes, they do. For example, the C-130s are tasked from the Joint Operations Center. They have flown Iraqi-only crews around Iraq on several occasions. They do have that directional control of the aircraft, and it's not unusual for an aircraft -- one surveillance aircraft -- to take off with an all-Iraqi crew and go surveil the pipeline. Obviously, the catch is we have to figure out -- not figure out -- but they have to be able to talk with the controlling agency. So, typically what you'll have on the airplane is if you have one Iraqi that speaks pretty good English, his Iraqi co-pilot will not necessarily have to speak English well enough to travel around in the airspace. But yes, they do have that tasking authority, and they do do it.

Q It's very interesting. I don't think that's a story that really has been out much, so I appreciate it very much. Thank you.

Q Hi, General. It's David Axe. Thanks for taking the time.

How are the Iraqis doing in terms of refining their ability to coordinate their air forces and their ground forces? Hello?

GEN. HOOG: Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I think that's -- as you know, that's one of the second skill sets in terms of the armies and air forces being able to communicate back and forth effectively. I would say that they're just now getting that set for the simple reason that the Iraqi air force is much further behind in its development

than the Iraqi army (has been ?). So, they are getting better. The standup of the Joint Operations Center has helped us dramatically. The Iraqi air force just stood up its first air operations center, and we've co-located that next to the Iraqi ground force headquarters about two weeks ago. As a matter of fact, today, the Iraqi air force is over briefing the Iraqi ground force headquarters on some of the capabilities that it has to offer. So, we're starting to get that (lashup ?), you know, tighter and tighter. But as you might expect, that is a long-term project that we'll just continue to work on each day.

Q Thank you.

Q Richard Fernandez, The Belmont Club.

General Hoog, I'm struck by the reorientation of the Iraqi air force from a kind of prestige and power, protection thing to this new sort of -- (inaudible). How does this fit with the prestige factor of the old air force guys? Do they see this as a kind of like pale shadow of the old 900 (heavy ?) combat aircraft Iraqi air force?

GEN. HOOG: That's a great question. I mean, I could probably explain it best -- I was down visiting where the commander is down in Basra. And this guy used to fly MiG-25s at 25,000 meters going Mach 2.5. And now he's flying a cheaper airplane with a push prop tail dragger that goes maybe 5 knots on a good day. So, yes, the prestige is not there. But I will tell you that what is there is a commitment to the, you know, nation of Iraq -- you know, the non-sectarian nation -- that these guys are coming back to support at great risk to themselves. I mean, I've got a number of -- one of the other commanders comes to work with a taxi sign on the top of his car, because if his neighbors knew what he did, his wife would be in (jeopardy ?). So, one of the things you get an appreciation of very quickly here -- and it's not just air force -- all of the Iraqi folks that come back -- is a level of personal risk that they go through just to come and do their job day in and day out. So, the glamour's not there. You and I both know that Iraq has the potential to once again become a rich nation. And I'm sure that in time -- you know, five, seven, eight, 10 years -- they'll go back and develop these capabilities. But in the meantime, they're focused on doing whatever they can to help this fight.

Q Thank you.

Q Hi, this is Charlie -- (inaudible) -- with -- (inaudible).

I have a question about helicopter pilot safety. (Inaudible) -- back in January a lot of instances of insurgents firing on helicopters in a coordinated manner. Are we doing much to reduce the level of danger that they're facing when they get in one of these things?

GEN. HOOG: You know, I don't want to go into the operational piece of it. All I would tell you is that, as you guys know, these insurgents are smart, and they adapt. And of course, we adapt and change our tactics as we can. The Army Corps has a lead in that whole piece, and I would defer any operational questions to them. But clearly, what we

do is we try to take the best practices and make sure that as we get these guys out here that we don't relearn any lessons the hard way. So, I'll defer to the Corps aviation on that, and I'll just tell you that we're trying to learn -- (inaudible).

Q General Hoog, Steve -- (inaudible) -- from -- (inaudible).

My question is regarding the current operations in Baghdad and the level of participation that the -- (inaudible) -- Iraqi air force is currently involved in and what significant increase you might envision by the time this next wave of operations is complete, if you see a significant increase in their participation.

GEN. HOOG: I do see an increase. As I mentioned earlier, the C-130 was just the first -- (inaudible) -- to bring the troops in. As you might imagine, it's also going to be used to rotate them in and out. We had done the first MEDEVAC mission seven days ago, and we're setting up what we would call a channel mission. Since many of these troops are from the northern and southern regions, the ability to take the troops back to their home areas, so that's a C-130 piece. The CH2000 deployed into Baghdad, and it's doing missions -- one or two every day -- looking at checkpoint and some of the blocking positions, as I mentioned, to verify that they are there. And then I think the next thing you're going to see is, as you know, General Petraeus says this is an ongoing effort that's building. As a matter of fact, many of the troops that they're asking for won't even be -- (inaudible) -- middle of the summer. And as the Iraqi air force continues to develop capability with the helicopters and the additional 11 Huey IIs come, I think by the middle of this summer to late December, you're going to see a much greater participation of their helicopters involved in operations as they get more mature and the training -- (inaudible).

Q Thank you very much, sir.

MODERATOR: Okay, this is John (Hope ?) again with OSD.

Has everybody had a chance to ask a question? Did somebody chime in late?

Q I chimed in late, Jack -- Andrew Lubin.

General, good morning -- or good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point.

How difficult is it to be training the Iraqis when there's such a language barrier? I mean, right now you've got -- (inaudible) -- and people working there. But when we -- I mean, English is a language of the flight line. What's going to happen?

GEN. HOOG: Well, I wish I had a solid answer to that. As always, you know, the guys on the ground figure out how to make it work. There are some red lines. For example, at what level do we start training folks? And you said you're at Cavalry ON Point. You probably know that the minimum English score for anybody to come into the U.S. for training is 80 on the Defense Language Institute's introductory test.

Q Correct.

GEN. HOOG: We're looking at the option of maybe lowering that to a 70 in-country, because we'll have a combination of Iraqi instructors as well as U.S. instructors. And we'll be operating an airplane like the Bell jet -- (inaudible) -- type airplane where it's side by side, and you've got a little bit more room for error. So, that's one of these areas now where we're kind of working on the (edge ?) here. Another one will be in helicopters. Some folks thought originally that you're going to have to have an English-speaking Iraqi in every helicopter. As you know, usually around here you fly two helicopters at a time to every place that you go. So, our current methodology now is you can have an Iraqi crew that is taught by Iraqi instructors that do speak English and have communicated with our advisers -- both the Air Force and Army -- in helicopters here. And they set what you guys would call a MET. And once they've accomplished their minimum essential task in terms of being able to land in -- (inaudible) -- zones, spot landings, night, all those things, that you could actually have a crew where you would have to have a good enough English-speaking Iraqi helicopter pilot to fly with a U.S. pilot -- the (safety of flight ?) issues as you can imagine. And then the other helicopter can all be certified to the same standard by the Iraqi instructors and monitored by the U.S. ones to make sure that they -- (inaudible) -- the need. But you're exactly right. I mean, that's why we keep saying we need to be slow and controlled, because we can't let this get to the point where the U.S. advisers can no longer fly in the helicopters because of either maintenance concerns or operational -- (inaudible). And I think if we take a controlled and measured path, we'll get there quicker in the long run versus if we just lose control, and the next thing you know, we're back to square one. Does that kind of answer your question?

Q Yeah, it makes me think -- (inaudible) -- the Americans. (Laughter.)

(Is this ?) a country that's -- (inaudible) -- at cutting corners. And it seems to me that we're going to start letting them go off -- (inaudible) -- learning English -- you know, if they're cutting corners right from the start, it gets worse not better over time.

GEN. HOOG: Well, I mean, let's put it this way. I mean, if you're a fixed-wing guy, and they have the IKAO standard, a lot of their fixed-wing folks went to training overseas, and most of them speak English. As a matter of fact, I've met quite a few that speak Russian, you know, as you might expect.

Q Right.

GEN. HOOG: On the rotary-wing side, English language isn't as common, because if you never left the borders of Iraq, you never had to speak English. We're actually having more of a challenge in our rotary-wing side, but you're exactly right. That's why we've got these DLI instructors over here. That's why we're setting minimum standards so that, as you know, if there's no minimum program as a backstop, you know, you backslide just like you said, and you spiral down. So, we're going to set that



standard, and we're working through the details now, and then we'll build it slowly. And that's why it's so important that we get these young Iraqis. And I will tell you, you know, most of us here are probably not that young, although I can't tell by the bios here. But teaching me Arabic and teaching my 12-year-old daughter Arabic would be two different challenges. We have already had our English instructors have to come back with the young (67 ?) cadets -- all of the university guys that were teaching English. They are progressing far faster than any of the older Iraqi guys who are set in their ways that are not quite as interested in learning English. And it's that next generation that, obviously, we're trying to touch. And if you think about it, if we graduate 25 Iraqi helicopter pilots that speak English fluently and -- (inaudible) -- them out into the Iraqi air force flying helicopters, how many two-shifts of helicopters can I now support with a young 25-year-old lieutenant who speaks fluent English? That's how we're trying to branch out.

Q Good point -- appreciate it.

GEN. HOOG: I wish I had a better answer, but we've got to deal with what we've been dealt.

Q I understand -- appreciate that.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you very much. Has anybody got any follow-up questions? We've got just a few minutes left.

Q I do. This is David Axe.

General, on the same -- to follow up to my previous question about the -- (inaudible) -- on getting Iraqi air forces to (liaise ?) with ground forces. Any plans to train up Iraqi airport air controllers?

GEN. HOOG: Not at the present time. I think they're going to align that with the capability to provide that type of support. As you know, it's going to take probably at least 16, 18 months by the time that decision is made. And when that happens, we'll probably, again, just try to line up the training for the air support controllers at the same time we're lining up the training and equipping of the air force itself.

Q Okay.

Q General, it's Mark Finkelstein again.

I had a little audio breakup on my side. I did hear you state a goal of doubling the size of the Iraqi air force in terms of men I understood. Could you give us some actual numbers in terms of how many trained pilots there are currently are and what the goal is in terms of the number of trained pilots to be at a certain period of time?

GEN. HOOG: Okay. The Iraqi air force has about 950 people now. A lot of these people we're going to double-up with are the non-aviation skill sets. For example,

one of the bases that they'll probably fly out of first by themselves -- Kirkuk -- they need about 300 or 320 soldiers -- jundis -- to guard the installation itself. So, some of these people are not going to be the English speakers. Currently, we have about 110 Iraqi pilots, 85 of which are actively flying. And our goal is to get at least another 50 to 100 former Iraqi aviators back into the service. Because if we can get them, we can bridge the gap between when we start the flight training this fall and the first student starts graduating later on in the summer and fall of '08. So, we'd like to re-recruit, if you will, at least 85 to 100 Iraqi pilots. But as you know, it ain't just pilots. You've got to have the air traffic controllers there -- some of which were IKAO certified and speak English and some of them who weren't -- radar controllers, the people to run the air fields, the people to run the -- (inaudible). All those skill sets have to come in. And clearly, everybody doesn't have to speak English. But the senior maintainer -- the one that goes back for advanced of maintenance training at Shepherd Air Force Base in Texas -- if he speaks English, he can come back and bring it back to the entire Iraqi unit. For example, air traffic control -- a lot of that is being taught by a U.S. contractor at BIAP international airport. And we've partnered with IRMO, the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office, in the training of civilian air traffic controllers. At the same time they're training civilians, we have 13 Iraqi air force cadets in that same program that are ready to come out and start actual flight training.

So, our goal is to go up to about 18(00) to 1,850. Probably half to two-thirds of those are not English speakers. A good 150 to 200 are going to be re-recruited. Then I need another 100, 150 to put into the training pipeline so that in another 12 months, they can start going to some of this advanced training and get the English and everything else.

Q Great, thank you, General.

MODERATOR: Okay. We're about out of time here, General Hoog. Do you have any closing comments?

GEN. HOOG: No. I guess what I would tell you is I think we've got the right (directorate ?) from the boss on down about what we're trying to do today. (Inaudible) -- air force is designed to meet this need and lay the foundation -- just like one of the gentleman asked -- so that it doesn't regress, as he says. And I guess I would close with this thought. The average age of the Iraqi aviators is about 45 to 47 years old. And a lot of you, looking at the bios, have been involved in training around the world. You know what it takes to effect change over time. What I would tell you is that if we can train for the next three to four years 2(00) to 300 new Iraqi aviators and start to inculcate some of the way that we think that this is a wholesale change in the backbone of their air force. And just like the Army today, they've been working, and they got young lieutenants out there who have been doing this for two to two and a half years and -- (inaudible) -- as folks -- (inaudible). So, this is a chance to make a significant change in how we do business here, and we're looking forward to it.

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